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ABSTRACT

The political implications of decisions on curriculum content are discussed. A review of the literature on school policies is analyzed with particular consideration of who determines what will be studied in the classroom and what bias may be reflected in textbook selection. It is argued that while it is generally assumed that boards of education determine what shall be taught in the schools, teachers actually have a greater impact on what children actually learn. By choosing what to emphasize in a course, by selecting certain methods of teaching subjects, and by preferring one textbook over another, teachers, in effect, make policy, and this is, in essence, a political action. (JD)

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CONTENT DECISION-MAKING AND THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION

John Schwille, Andrew Porter,
and Michael Gant

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Content Decision Making and the Politics of Education[1]

John Schwille, Andrew Porter, and Michael Gant[2]

Public education was once thought by many to be apolitical (or at least capable of becoming so). According to Iannaccone (1977), there was a widespread belief that public service could be divorced from politics, that administrators could make neutral value-free decisions, and that actions allowing social cleavage to surface were contrary to the public interest. Over the past 15 years much of the literature in the politics of education has been devoted to debunking these beliefs (Peterson, 1974; Scribner, 1977). This demythologizing has not gone as far as it might, however. In this paper we discuss ways in which this criticism has been incomplete.

Our starting point is a project at the Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT). This project is an investigation of factors which influence the content of instruction. While not originally conceived in response to the politics of education literature, the project does have implications for research in this field. It follows the lead of Kirst and Walker (1971) and Boyd (Note 1) in looking at the political nature of decisons about the content of instruction. It also argues that political research should give more attention to the decisions of individual teachers.

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[1]This paper was presented at the annual conference of the Politics of Education Association (in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association), San Francisco, 1979. The many contributions of our colleagues Robert Floden, Donald Freeman, Lucy Knappen, Therese Kuhs, and William Schmidt to the IRT Content Determinants research described in this paper are gratefully acknowledged.

[2]John Schwille is a researcher with IRT's Content Determinants Research Program. Andrew Porter is coordinator of that group, and Michael Gant is a graduate assistant with the group.

An Argument for Political Research on Content

Content as a Policy Output

Among the decisions studied by specialists in the politics of education, content decisions do not loom large. Content is less salient in the literature than such matters as collective bargaining, school finance, school desegregation, and changes in enrollment. Political analysts, like the legislatures, school boards, and administrative elites they study, have been most attentive to issues generating public conflict. In fact, conflict can be and has been used as a basis for defining politics: "We should recognize that conflict lies at the heart of politics. In a world of universal agreement, there would be no room for it" (Miller, 1962, p. 14).

Such a definition limits the role of politics in content decision making. Although conflicts in education are likely to have side effects on the content of instruction, most of these conflicts do not focus on content per se. Moreover, when conflicts over content do arise, they are often peripheral to the content emphasized in schools (where emphasis is defined in terms of student time devoted to the content in question). Disputes over religion, sex education, and the federally-funded Man, a Course of Study (MACOS) are instances in point.

To be sure, conflicts over content have rippled through the mainstream curriculum at times. For example, controversy broke out in science and foreign languages during the Sputnik era of the late 1950s and early 1960s (Spring, 1976) and, more recently, in basic literacy and numeracy. Yet what these examples make clear is that the study of conflict brings content into the foreground of the politics of education either on a peripheral

or irregular basis. Perhaps there are other political perspectives which would keep content in the forefront of a research agenda for the politics of education.

Content is also largely ignored among political analysts who study policy outputs ("what a government does, as distinguished from what it says it is going to do," Anderson, 1975, p. 5). For, as Munns (1975) says in criticism of Thomas Dye and his followers:[3]

> In actuality, the mainstream theorists do not by any means deal with all policy outputs; usually they deal only with those which are easily quantifiable such as the level of taxing and spending for selected program areas and adoption versus nonadoption of particular programs. This is, of course, an overly restricted view of policy outputs. Many important kinds of "value commitments" have little relationship to expenditure. (p. 656)

School finance studies, for example, use as measures of output educational expenditures appropriately (or sometimes inappropriately) adjusted for differences in number of students, district wealth, and other factors. Such an approach gives little indication of what is being purchased for this money. It could be the teaching of subject-matter; it could be custodial care. The same level of resources may serve many different purposes in education. If such differences are important, a taxonomy of outputs which takes these differences into account will be of interest. In making this point, our purpose is not to argue that the existing literature is without value because it has so little to say about the content of instruction (and indeed other subcategories of output as well). What we do suggest is that this literature will give an incomplete account of the politics of education as long as it pays so little attention to the variety of educational outputs.

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[3]See also Peterson (1974) and Boyd (1978) for comments on the applicability of the Dye school of thought to education.

Content is important for categorizing the outputs of schooling inasmuch as it embodies differences in the way people think about the purposes of schooling, their preferences for schooling, and the demands they make upon schools. Content, for us, consists of all those knowledges, skills, or attitudes that one might want children to learn in school. Content in this sense might be compared to other ways of looking at the outputs of schooling. For example, content outputs might be contrasted with school-as-daycare outputs. Or content could be crossed with various methods of instruction to give a two-way classification of outputs.

We have chosen to single out content, not to compare it with other ways of classifying the outputs of schooling, but rather to find out what variation there is within content. The educational literature is witness to the great variety in what is or might be learned in school. And, in fact, the content of instruction in any one elementary or secondary school is highly differentiated. Content also presumably varies in significant ways from one American school to another, although, surprisingly, the extent of such variation has received little systematic study.[4]

From a political perspective, moreover, we must be concerned not only with *actual* variation in content, but with *potential* variation as well. That is, we must study the process by which groups and individuals demand new content. Actually, up to this point, this domain of potential content has received more attention from a political perspective than has variation in actual content. Cremin's (1961) history of progressive education and the Hottois and Milner (1975) study of sex education controversies are cases in point.

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[4]Our colleague William Schmidt is currently analyzing content variation across schools using data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics for their National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972.

Variation in content covered in the classroom is one of the most likely determinants of variation in content learned. This relationship, though obvious, has long been neglected in educational research (Institute for Research on Teaching, Note 2). Two reasons can be given to show why this tie between content covered and content learned is of potential interest to the political analyst. First, by comparing content covered and content learned to the demands of particular constituencies, there is a basis for an evaluation of schooling (Porter, Schmidt, & Floden, 1978), for what policy analysts call the assessment of policy outcomes (the impact of a policy on the populations served) as distinguished from the analysis of policy outputs (services provided). Second, content covered is more susceptible to intentional change than many determinants of learning, thus qualifying as a policy variable. It may even be changed in many instances without varying the monetary value of the services provided.

The Intersection of Content and Politics

If content is taken as a policy output, are all content decisions political or can some be excluded from the purview of the politics of education? To answer this question, we can try to pass content decisions through the screens set up by various definitions of politics. For example, we can say that content decisions are allowed through Lasswell's (1936) loose definition of politics as the process which determines who gets what, when, and how, for content, as noted above, is a way to categorize who gets what in terms of the differentiated services of schooling.

Applying a more rigorous test, we find that many content decisions also conform to the Riker and Ordeshook (1973) definition of politics as (1) the aggregation of individual preferences into a social choice and (2) the subsequent enforcement of that choice. By this statement we mean that the content decisions made by public school personnel can be imposed on groups of children. This statement about enforcement, together with Easton's (1965) well-known definition of politics as the authoritative allocation of values indicates that one good way to assess the political implications of content decisions is to ask whether and in what respect they are authoritative.

"Authoritative" implies that persons subject to a decision are in some way bound by the decision. In some sense, therefore, all public school decisions not shown to be irregular or outside legally prescribed responsibilities are authoritative. For example, school board decisions to spend money can be challenged only under specified circumstances. Content decisions, however, are authoritative in other respects as well. They are not only allocative, as noted above, but also regulatory in the sense of requiring compliance with certain rules. Certain schools are required to offer a certain content, and a certain content is required for certain diplomas. Moreover, the conscription of students through compulsory schooling reinforces the authoritative nature of these requirements. That is, since schooling is compulsory for all persons of certain ages, exposure to a certain content is mandatory.

Other legal stipulations likewise reinforce the authoritative nature of content decisions. For example, teachers "do not have the right to pursue their own notion of an educational program when it is in conflict with the prescribed program adopted by the [school] board " (van Geel, 1976, p. 121). Similarly, parents enjoy few rights to con-

trol the content to which their children are exposed. Constitutionally protected areas such as religion provide but a limited legal basis for challenging the content decisions made by public officials.

Challenges are somewhat unlikely in any case since content policies are often imbued with a certain legitimacy. That is, they are regarded as intrinsically right and proper by those with a stake in these policies. Legitimacy means that sanctions are rarely needed for enforcement. The result, as the "new" sociologists of education have observed (e.g., Young, 1971), is that content is frequently taken for granted by the interested parties. For example, the value of certain aspects of literacy and numeracy is taken as self-evident in this society.

Although many content decisions are authoritative in these respects, some are not. Some are questioned and become political, not in the sense of being authoritative, but in the sense of being subject to conflict. Still others are disregarded. They are not binding on children in classrooms. School boards, for example, may adopt resolutions which call for children to learn to be good citizens, knowledgeable of the world, appreciative of the arts, respectful of the environment, and willing to live in harmony with others. Although such pious vows may have a political purpose and generate political support, they may well have no impact on classrooms. Thus, to find out if content decisions are authoritative as far as content is concerned, we need to see if they influence classroom instruction. Being interested in content as a policy output in the restricted sense of services delivered to students, we are not concerned with decisions which have no influence on classrooms. In short, our conclusion is that all con-

tent decisions which influence classroom outputs can be considered political either because the content in question is authoritative or because the content has been challenged and is therefore subject to conflict.

And yet content is still discussed as if it were not political in nature. As Wirt and Kirst (1975) say, "Educators customarily conceive curricular decisions as nonpolitical, professional matters" (p. 202). We would not deny that there are nonpolitical aspects to content decisions, and we will demonstrate below that the distinction between political and nonpolitical is important to our research. But we would be very cautious about classifying any content decisions that affect the classroom as outside the realm of politics. That which is taken for granted by practitioner or layperson need not be taken for granted by the analyst.[5]

Mathematics as a Policy Output

Our own studies at the IRT deal with factors influencing the content of elementary school mathematics. Among those who once believed that education ought not be political, mathematics must have seemed the most apolitical of subjects. Now, however, after two decades of efforts to influence the mathematics curriculum, it is clear that this basic subject can provoke conflict. The federally-funded efforts of experts to influence content in the 1960s gave way, in large part, to the more popular back-to-the-basics movement of the 1970s. In both cases, the content of school mathematics has been severely criticized.

Mathematics was chosen for our research for several reasons.

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[5]We thus make a plea similar to the "new" sociologists of education in Britain (Bernbaum, 1977; Karabel & Halsey, 1977), who ask that the content of instruction not be taken for granted by sociologists. Instead, they propose that a central task for the sociology of education be to explain the cause and effect relation between content and social stratification.

While the criteria used were not derived from the politics of education, they do have something to say about the appropriateness of mathematics content as a policy output. The first reason is that mathematics is considered a basic skill that all children in elementary school should study. The second is that mathematics seems to be a subject which is learned primarily in school. Thus, if we are to view content as a policy output, these reasons suggest that mathematics deserves a major place among such outputs. Finally, since mathematics is a subject for which precise and careful descriptions of content are possible, our attempt to *measure* content as a policy output will be facilitated by this choice of subject-matter. In fact, much of our effort thus far has gone into a taxonomy, which can be used to describe the content of fourth-grade mathematics in the detail needed to address the questions raised by our research (see Figure for a list of the factors and levels which, when crossed, form this taxonomy). Eventually, both content covered in classrooms and content called for by forces impinging on the classroom will be measured by taxonomies of this sort. We have already found considerable actual and potential variation in a subject that, to some, appears cut-and-dried.

An Argument for Political Research on Teachers

Policy from the Top Versus Policy from the Bottom

The politics of education literature reveal a world of highly aggregated decision making. It is a world largely populated by groups, organizations, public bureaucracies, and their leaders. A revealing glimpse of this world is provided by Scribner and Englert's (1977) review of the field, which singles out three approaches to the local

politics of education. The first, which applies the concepts of community power studies to school systems, concerns itself mainly with elites, both within and without school systems, and organized interest groups. A second set of studies concentrates on the political and economic characteristics of communities and the subsequent impact of these factors on school policy making. As with the first approach, the focus is on elites, with such actors as mayors and school board members viewed as the major decision makers. The third set of studies looks at the political interactions of school boards, superintendents, and the larger community.

One example of the latter approach can be found in Ziegler, Tucker and Wilson (1977), who analyzed the policy-making process of 11 school districts in the United States and Canada to answer the question: "Who governs the schools?" The data analyzed consisted of the following:

(1) Records of the statements and decisions made at meetings of school governance bodies.

(2) Interviews with school board members, administrators, and superintendents.

(3) School policy survey data collected from the public, interest group leaders, and senior administrators.

Note that such data preclude talking about the role of individual teachers in the governance of education. A similar concentration on community and educational leaders characterizes the Zeigler and Jennings (1974) study, Governing American Schools, which is based on interviews with several hundred school board members and superintendents, as well as political and socioeconomic background data on a national sample of American school districts.

This top-heavy perspective on school politics is useful for many issues, but it is nevertheless incomplete and, for this reason, the source of some bias in the field. Paul Peterson, (1976) in School Politics Chicago Style, argues that ideological bargaining, pluralist bargaining, rational decision-making, and organizational models each illuminate certain aspects of educational politics and neglect others.

The same point can be made with regard to the four Peterson models taken together. Like the studies reviewed by Scribner and Englert (1977), the Peterson models concentrate on system-wide decision-making and leave unexplored what might be important aspects of the politics of education; for example, variation in policy outputs at the operating level is not considered of major interest. Thus, while variation in policy outputs occurs within, as well as between, school districts, Peterson, in applying his organizational model, stresses the internal unity of the district: "The organizational model, as constructed here, treats policy as a function of an organization which is an undifferentiated whole and which therefore has a single set of interests, values and routines" (p. 135). Regardless of the model Peterson uses, he considers within-system variation in outputs only to the extent necessary to explain system-wide decisions.

Exhaustive treatment is, of course, not possible within any one book; Peterson's analysis is something of a tour de force as it stands. But within the field as a whole, a greater range of perspectives is desirable since preoccupation with system-wide decision making has undesirable consequences.

In particular, the formal hierarchies of schools tend to be overemphasized. Peterson's organizational model, for example, is very much at odds with what has come to be called the loosely-coupled

nature of schools (Bidwell, 1965; Lortie, 1969; March, 1978; Weick, 1976). Consider, for example, the following statements from March's (1978) review of public school administration:

> The classical administrator acts on the basis of knowledge about the objectives, technology, and past experience of the organization. In educational administration all three are ambiguous. (p. 228)
>
> Even where goals are clear, lack of knowledge about the technology of schooling complicates their implementation. (p. 228)
>
> The learning activities of children and teaching activities of teachers are only marginally related to the activities of administrators. (p. 229)
>
> The situation is masked sometimes by considerable panoply of hierarchical artifacts--plans, memoranda, meetings, rules, deference, annoyance, organization charts, evaluations; but most observers agree that direct administrative leverage over education is relatively small and distributed widely through a large number of only loosely coordinated administrative positions. (pp. 229-30)

In short, according to this point of view, teachers have considerable autonomy (vis-a-vis the formal organization) to make the content decisions which we argue to be political. Various studies of teaching and reports on new curricula make similar claims for teacher independence (Brown & McIntyre, 1978; Harding, 1978; Lortie, 1969; Lortie, 1975; Taylor, 1975; Taylor & Reid, 1971).

In contrast, political analysts tend to view teachers as the *implementors* of decisions made at higher levels--a perspective which may be perfectly reasonable when the main interest is to put into practice the new programs called for by policy boards or administrators. But much of what goes on in classrooms has very little to do with the implementation of anything in particular. As we have just argued, the services provided in classrooms, even when not closely tied to decisions taken at higher levels, are in some sense

policy outputs, meriting explanation in their own right.

Thus, studies of implementation (e.g., Bardach, 1977; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) are not the best approach to a comprehensive analysis of school policy outputs. Implementation studies start with policy directives, derive intended outputs from these directives, and then assess the extent to which the directives are carried out and the intended outputs realized. This top-down perspective is illustrated in a summary from the Edwards and Sharkansky (1978) chapter on implementation:

> Top officials must take several steps to assure proper implementation. They must issue policy directives that are clear and consistent; hire adequate staff and provide them with the information and authority necessary to carry out their orders; offer incentives for staff to execute policy as decision-makers intended; and effectively follow up on the implemental actions of subordinates. (p. 321)

This statement makes no compromise with the loosely-coupled nature of most public agencies, yet, in the earlier parts of the same chapter, the authors show how unlikely such agencies are to operate as prescribed by the summary.

In contrast to implementation studies, the approach we propose is to start with actual policy outputs (that is, particular services provided by a public agency) and then ask what factors determine the nature and level of these outputs. We know from the Rand change agent study (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978), among others, that educational programs undergo considerable adaptation to local conditions during the course of implementation. The question we would pose is whether this process of adaptation is better understood by starting with the

program and finding out how it is modified during implementation (a top-down approach), or by starting with classroom instruction and finding out what factors influence it including, in particular, the attempt to introduce a certain program (or bottom-up approach). While the two approaches share a common interest in policy outputs as a dependent variable, they are likely to differ both in outputs considered and in factors thought to influence these outputs.

The study of implementation seems particularly well suited to the analysis of relatively well-defined policies, for this approach is very much dependent on our ability to infer intended outputs from statements of policy. But statements of policy are frequently vague and thus compatible with a variety of outputs. Different policies or even different statements of the same policy may be incompatible in some respects. Some statements may even be internally inconsistent. Ambiguities and inconsistencies of this sort are especially common when the stakes are high and conflicts difficult to resolve. Lortie (1969) observed: "Pluralism of values creates difficulties for [school] boards in assigning priorities among goals or in specifying particular goals; there is a tendency for boards to temper the divisive potential of such decisions by employing techniques of avoidance" (p. 6). Efforts to promote accountability in education through explicit statements of educational goals have by no means resolved this dilemma. We try to reduce the problem by excluding the delineation of intended outputs from such a critical role in our research. Instead we start with the analysis of ongoing services and work back to see to what extent these services are influenced by statements of policy.

Even if policy directives are clear in their statement of in-

tended outputs, the top-down and bottom-up approaches are likely to focus on different outputs, for policy directives can give a very incomplete view of the outputs of public agencies. Since policy boards, legislatures, and executives spend disproportionate amounts of time on issues of controversy and the allocation of marginal monies, their directives are inadequate guides to actual outputs. An analysis which starts with actual outputs should turn up longstanding ways of doing things which are hardly subject to scrutiny by higher authorities, unanticipated consequences of decisions taken at higher levels, as well as partially implemented programs of current interest.

Another shortcoming of the implementation approach is its emphasis on formal hierarchical control. To be sure, hierarchical control plays a role, even in the loosely coupled world of schools, but its role can best be understood by finding out precisely how much it weighs (relative to other studied influences) in the decisions of persons at the operating level -- in our case, teachers. An implementation approach could easily misrepresent forces which act *directly* on such persons, especially if these forces are unorganized. What might appear inexplicable resistance from an implementation point of view may be more comprehensible if studied as an influence worthy of study in its own right. The influence of clients (e.g., students and parents) acting as individuals would be one such force.

The bottom-up approach echoes recent articles by Hawley (1977) and Weatherley and Lipsky (1977). Hawley, noting the lack of research which might show what effect political processes have on children's learning, observes that "most political scientists do not approach problem solving by looking back from the point of impact to examine alternative explanations for political outcomes " (p. 328). Weatherley

and Lipsky (1977), in a study of the implementation of a Massachusetts special education law, also compare a top-down and bottom-up approach. The latter, they say, "turns the usual study of implementation on its head. Now the lowest levels of the policy chain are regarded as the makers of policy and the higher level of decision-making is seen as circumscribing, albeit in important ways, the lower-level policy-making context " (p. 173).

Teachers Make Policy, Too

A bottom-up approach, without undue emphasis on formal organization, allows for considerable teacher autonomy. From this perspective, the teacher's decisions are not, in essence, a matter of saying yes or no to hierarchical directives and their intended output. Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) use the term "street level bureaucrats" to designate individuals in the lower levels of hierarchies, individuals whose work is inherently discretionary, and who must find ways of accommodating the demands placed upon them by clients and of coping with resource limitations. For these two analysts, "street level bureaucrats *are the policymakers* in their respective work arenas" (p. 172, emphasis in original).

To look at the teacher as a policy maker or as a political broker is to see a person who has some discretion, but who is also, to some degree, responsive to political and organizational pressures. For such a teacher, discretion in matters of content is not negligible, nor is it precisely predictable, given knowledge of a formal hierarchical division of responsibilities.[6] Thus, the notion of teacher as policy

[6]The related notion of a zone of tolerance "within which local educators are free to exercise professional leadership" and its implications for curriculum decisions are discussed in Boyd (Note 1). This notion differs from our emphasis on teacher discretion in that (1) it is concerned with professional educators (administrators as well as teachers) and (2) it focuses on constraints imposed by the values of the local community (that is, it does not invite consideration of all the other pressures on teachers that might reduce their discretion).

maker is consistent with the view that schools are loosely coupled.

Heretofore, the interest of education politics in individual teacher decisions has been slight. Morrish (1976) recognizes the teacher's ability to block the implementation of innovations. But he suggests that teachers are not effective in initiating or creating change since, at some point, administrative decisions regarding the allocation of resources must be made. Yet to speak of the allocation of resources could be seen as calling for more emphasis on individual teachers, not less. The labor-intensive resources of schools are concentrated in teacher time and student time. Individual teachers control teacher time and to a great extent student time too--frequently without much supervision on the part of their superiors.

The contrast between professionals exercising independent judgment and professionals following directives established by the organizations within which they work is a classic sociological theme in teaching as in other occupations (Dreeben, 1970).[7] The danger in this contrast is that, for lack of a middle position, one can easily overestimate either the degree to which teachers are constrained by their school system or the degree to which they exercise autonomy within the system. Viewing the teacher as a policy-maker offers a way of reconciling these two perspectives on teaching. From this point of view teachers are thought to have enough discretion for their teaching to be influenced by their own beliefs of what schooling ought to be. But at the same time teachers will follow (or be constrained to follow) certain pressures from without. These pressures may be consistent or inconsistent with their own ideas of what schooling ought to be.

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[7] For recent use of this distinction in the debate over the Federal law on the education of all handicapped children (P.L. 94-142), see Turnbull and Schlechty (1978).

Teachers are likely to respond to external factors to which they attribute authority or power. In thinking about authority and power, we follow Spady and Mitchell's (Note 3) reformulation of Weber: authority is a matter of voluntary submission of the subordinate in order to obtain personal fulfillment, whereas power involves a subordinate who is controlled through the hope of rewards and the fear of punishments. According to Spady and Mitchell, the fulfillment of submitting to authority can be experienced in each of four modes: affirming fundamental values of a social system (traditional), accepting responsibilities defined by rules (legal), responding to the appeal of engrossing and spontaneous interpersonal relations (charismatic), and following an expert in order to achieve greater adequacy in purposeful activities (expert). Power likewise accrues to the superordinate in four different ways, each of which derives from one of the modes of authority.

Viewing the teacher as policy-maker thus becomes one way to allow for rationality of decision-making at the operating level of educational organizations. In assuming rationality, we follow the political economists in asserting that individuals have preferences, can order these preferences, and will take action to realize their preferences (cf. Boyd, 1978; Downs, 1957, 1967). Thus, in some sense the models of decision-making explicated by Peterson (1976) in School Politics Chicago Style are transposed to the operating level: the teacher is seen as a rational decision maker constrained or swayed by political bargaining and organizational routines.

With this view of the teacher, researchers can respond to the issues raised by Frederick Wirt (1977) in the Teachers College Record. Wirt says that "we have some quite good efforts to define this relationship between the political and the educational, but all of this is at

the macro-level. . . . What it means at the micro-level of, say, the school site or school room is simply not that clear." Consideration of the micro-level is required by the argument that the content decisions which influence classroom instruction are authoritative and therefore political insofar as the consequences of the decisions are concerned. Once these decisions are accepted for consideration, it is also important to address Wirt's question about what is political and what is nonpolitical in the processes by which such decisions are made:

> [Decisions are] "political" when textbook decisions are made by the state, even in providing a set of options, and certainly it is political when the district school authority exercises those options by narrowing the list even further, upon advice from central office professionals. But is it "political" if the teacher chooses Text A over Text B, with only those choices before her, because she likes A's readability, its clarity and beauty in pictures and figures, its stimulus to learning provided by the end-of-chapter questions, and other criteria which she or he regards as "professional," i.e., directly related to furthering the basic task of learning? (p. 406)

The best way to deal with Wirt's question is not in terms of the level at which decisions are made, but in terms of the information and criteria used to make authoritative decisions, whatever the level. It is essential to note that in taking this position we are now viewing content decisions as political in two ways. One deals with the *product* of the decisions: a decision which influences the content covered in classrooms is political in the sense that it is authoritatively imposed on a group of children. The other looks at the *process* by which content decisions are made. We define this process as *political* insofar as it explicitly takes the directives, demands, or preferences of others into account, and *nonpolitical* to the extent that it is independently based on other information. Teachers, like school boards and superintendents, can make decisions which are political in both of these respects.[8]

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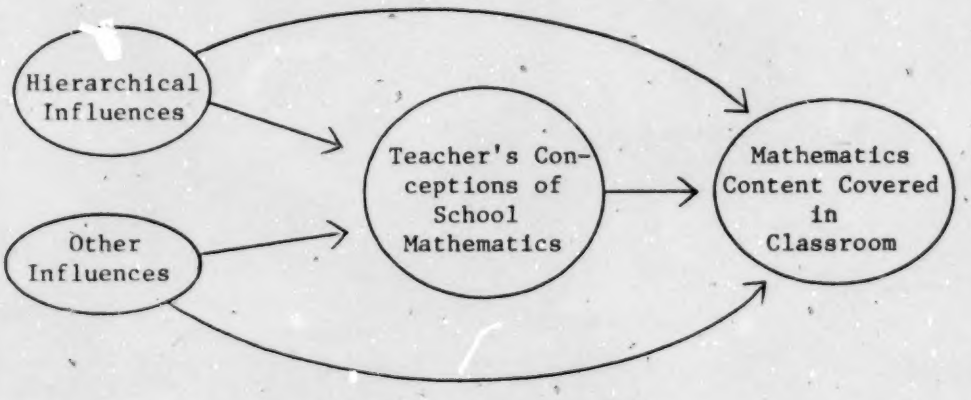
[8] Those decisions defined as political because they are subject to conflict can now be subsumed under the *process* definition since the process by which decisions are made would involve consideration of the demands and preferences of parties to the conflict.

Our Research in Political Perspective

David Cohen (1978) suggests that of all the governmental social agencies, local schools are among the most sensitive to public pressure. Does this sensitivity extend to all levels and aspects of educational policy? We see our research as a test of sensitivity at the teacher level in the area of mathematics. Since mathematics is less controversial than such subjects as sex education, social studies, or even science, we believe that this subject will provide a good conservative test of the extent to which consideration of others' preferences and demands enter into teachers' decisions (cf. Boyd, Note 1, p. 30).

This research can be viewed in terms of three sources of influence on teacher decision-making: (1) a formal hierarchical component which transmits the policy decisions of higher authorities and which, therefore, reflects political processes bearing on a school system as a whole; (2) other influences from inside or outside the agency which are brought directly to bear on the teacher; and (3) the teacher's own conceptions of what outputs are desirable and feasible. Our eventual aim is to estimate the strength of these influences on teachers using measures of content as the dependent variable. Such a model in simplified form would appear as follows:



When viewed in this way, our research is similar to what Wirt and Kirst (1975) lay out in their revised version of a paper by Kirst & Walker (1971) and then exclude as beyond the state of the art:

> A mapping of the political system for curricular policy-making in local schools is exceedingly complex. It involves three levels of government, numerous private organizations (including foundations, accrediting associations, national testing agencies, textbook-software companies), and interest groups, such as the John Birch Society or NAACP....Moreover, there is a configuration of leverage points within a particular local school system, including the teacher, department head, assistant superintendent for instruction, superintendent, and school board. Cutting across all levels of government is the pervasive influence of the mass media, which various celebrities, commentators, interest groups, and journalists use to disseminate their views on curriculum. It would be very helpful if we were able to quantify the amount of influence of each of these and show input-output interactions for just one school system, let alone a representative sample (p. 207).

Wirt and Kirst are right: a full model quantifying all influences is beyond the state of the art. Nevertheless, we believe it is time to make a start. Little can be said beyond anecdote, practitioner judgment and literate essays until there is more empirical study of these questions, whether through case study or quantitative methods. For example, Wirt and Kirst (1975) in the same article downplay the role of teachers in curriculum decisions (pp. 220-21), but lack data to support their conclusions. The history of curriculum development over the last two decades also suggests that the teacher role is not well understood and needs research. Partially informed opinion seems to have gone from the idea that curricula could be teacher-proof to the idea that teacher resistance to packaged curricula makes national development of curricula unwise under any circumstances.

Decisions regarding teachers' careers, teacher education, curriculum development, and future research can be usefully

informed by whatever can be done to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are teachers' content decisions predetermined, either by policy set by higher authorities or by other external factors?

2. To the extent that these decisions are not predetermined, how are they made?

The conditions which increase teacher discretion need to be explored. One way in which discretion might be increased is when the content message transmitted by an external influence is vague. Thus, for example, vaguely worded calls for basic skills may give schools and teachers considerable discretion to decide what the basic skills are. In contrast, the trend toward increasingly detailed sets of educational objectives at school district level may have already reduced teacher discretion. But the extent of any such reduction depends on the clout behind these objectives -- in Spady's terms, the authority or power with which the content message or its advocates are endowed in the eyes of the teacher. The variation in these attributions of power and authority is likely to be considerable at all levels: between teachers, between schools, and between school districts.

In the case of some external factors, such as tests, the same content message may be perceived vaguely or specifically. In other words, teachers may have very little idea of what is on the tests or they may have a very detailed perception (which may be either accurate or inaccurate). But if the teacher's choice among content topics is to be influenced by the test, the teacher must know or conjecture what is on the test. And unless school districts take special pains to make sure either that teachers

know what is on tests or that, for reasons of test security, they are kept from knowing, what teachers know about tests depends largely on their own discretion.

Teacher discretion may also be increased by external factors whose content message is contradictory or inconsistent. The teacher who teaches to a textbook may be faced with examinations which include topics not in the textbook. Different levels in the school hierarchy may call for different content. For example, there is a large Michigan school district where the content of district objectives in elementary school mathematics differs considerably from the content of the mandatory state assesment tests, both having been analyzed with our taxonomy.

For our research, and to increase understanding of the politics of education, we need to know not only how much discretion teachers have under certain conditions, but also what information they use in making decisions. What options do they perceive and what criteria do they apply in making choices among these options? The answers to these questions will say a good deal about the importance of teachers in the political processes which influence education. In mathematics it is possible to conceive of a teacher who has a longstanding idea of what children should learn and who chooses and uses a textbook accordingly. Such a teacher would be making public policy in the sense of allocating teacher and student time to a certain content, but he or she would not be influenced by current political processes in making these decisions. It should be noted, however, that this teacher's ideas could have been the outcome of political processes at some earlier time.

Other teachers may be influenced by political processes, but only indirectly. For example, they may faithfully follow the textbooks adopted by a district curriculum committee. This committee may have been subject

to a variety of political influences: community groups calling for more emphasis on basic skills, guidelines of the state education department, information supplied by a teachers' subject matter association (such as the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics), and the views of individual teachers or administrators who have a reputation for being local authorities on the matter in question. The teacher using the textbook, however, may remain largely or entirely unaware of these influences. Still other teachers may respond directly to such political influences as well as being indirectly influenced through district decisions. That is, their content decisions may be affected by information on the preferences of groups, persons and official agencies and by attribution of authority or power to these groups, persons, or agencies.

In other words, two teachers who implement a content decision made by a school board may be doing so on quite different bases. One teacher may simply follow the district's chosen curriculum materials without consideration of why they were chosen. Another teacher may follow the same materials, but only because (s)he has heard directly or indirectly that the materials represent the preferences of persons (s)he regards as authoritative or powerful. A teacher we recently interviewed appealed to several external influences in justifying the stress he put on teaching geometry to advanced sixth-grade students:

> ...I think most of the mathematicians are interested in the geometry area....You look at the mail I get from the mathematics council and things like that are stressing geometry and the state math test they take stresses geometry....

Such a teacher might put very different weights, on such things as parent requests regarded as idiosyncratic, parent requests regarded as somehow representative of a larger group of parents, requests from persons

designated as group representatives, official documents which are known to embody the results of political negotiation, and positions given a certain prominence by their media coverage.

The content covered by teachers who blindly follow textbooks is easily predicted whereas the content covered by politically motivated teachers is more difficult to forecast. The first would be predicted to follow textbooks regardless of the political support marshalled for or against their adoption, whereas the second would be predicted to follow textbooks only under certain conditions of political support. Even then the latter sort of teacher might well pick and choose from the book. In contrast, if the textbook contains both content which has been endorsed by external persons (or groups) and content which has not, the first type of teacher is likely to teach the unendorsed as well as the endorsed content. Such extreme cases are perhaps unlikely to occur in practice, but they suffice to make the point that the information teachers use to make decisions could be important in understanding the determinants of the content of instruction.

The following sections describe our plans and progress thus far toward understanding these aspects of teaching. Our eventual aim is to do a quantitative study of natural variation in the content covered in fourth-grade mathematics and the extent to which this variation can be explained in terms of various external factors and the teacher's perception of these factors. Before such a study can be done, a great deal of work is needed in terms of developing and justifying causal models and measuring the variables within these models.

Policy-Capturing Studies[9]

Our first study investigated teacher perceptions of the effects of six sources of pressure to change the content of fourth-grade mathematics (Floden, Note 4). Our approach, following other research on human judgment (e.g., Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1973), used written descriptions of hypothetical schools. The factors considered in these descriptions included pressures from parents, teachers, and the school principal as well as district instructional objectives, textbooks supplied to the teacher, and test results reported in the local newspaper. By systematically varying the presence or absence of these factors, sixty-three vignettes were created. In each case, the pressure advocated the addition of five new topics and provided no support for the teaching of five topics that the teacher ordinarily covered. The pressures were always consistent in that the topics supported by each source were identical. This consistency can be seen in the following example of a vignette for objectives, test, and teachers:

> In Wakita the central administration has published, for fourth-grade mathematics, a set of objectives which all teachers have been directed to follow. At the end of the year, a standardized test in mathematics is administered in each grade. The test results for each school are published, by grade level, in the local newspaper.
>
> Shortly after your arrival, you study the set of objectives and the test which is used. You realize that these materials do not deal with five topics you have been accustomed to teaching in fourth-grade. You also note that they do include material on five topics you have never taught to fourth-graders.
>
> Also imagine that the teachers in your school express a particular interest in mathematics at staff meetings and in conversations in the teachers' room. During these discussions you find that the fifth- and sixth-grade teachers feel you should teach five topics you have not taught to fourth-graders in the past. They also question the value for fourth-graders of five topics you have been used to teaching. The topics mentioned in each

[9]The word *policy* here refers to a mathematical model representing the weights given cues in the judgments of an individual. Regression equations are frequently used for this purpose. This psychological use of the term *policy* thus differs from references in earlier parts of the paper to *policy* in a political science sense.

case are the same as those you noted in your examination of the test and the objectives.

After reading the vignette, teachers were asked, once in terms of core topics and once in terms of peripheral topics, whether they would teach the five new topics and whether they would continue to teach the five old topics.

Seventy-five teachers were recruited for the study from five diverse Michigan cities and surrounding areas.[10] The most notable aspect of their response to the vignettes was an expressed willingness to change instructional content, whatever the pressure for change. Differences between pressures in degree of expressed acquiescence were generally slight. The most endorsed pressure was not textbooks, but district objectives. For example, when we looked at the core topic question about whether the teacher would add five topics usually covered in other school systems, the mean response for vignettes with each of the following pressures standing alone was as follows,

		(Standard Error)
Objectives	1.67	(0.19)
Tests	2.06	(0.24)
Textbooks	2.47	(0.29)
Principal	2.49	(0.25)
Other Teachers	2.52	(0.24)
Parents	2.73	(0.24)

where a response of 1 is "virtually certain to teach these topics," 2 "fairly certain to teach these topics," and 3 "more inclined to teach these topics than not."

---

[10] Within location, teachers were randomly assigned to a half replicate of the 2^6 design. To control for order effects, each teacher received a different random ordering of the appropriate vignettes.

When we took the same question and looked at the means for all the vignettes with one source of pressure, two sources, etc., as the number of pressures increased, the teachers' expressed willingness to change approached virtual certainty.

		(Standard Error)
One-pressure vignettes	2.35	(0.19)
Two-pressure vignettes	1.76	(0.11)
Three-pressure vignettes	1.59	(0.11)
Four-pressure vignettes	1.39	(0.09)
Five-pressure vignettes	1.35	(0.10)
Six-pressure vignette	1.39	(0.13)

The extent to which the actual behavior of the teachers surveyed might reflect these self-reported intentions is debatable. Even our self-reports do not all claim ready compliance with external factors. For example, a third-grade teacher we recently interviewed spoke as follows of the instructional management system (IMS) (with its objectives and tests) which is actively promoted by the administration of her district:

> I tend to take what I need from the system and ignore what I don't need or I tend to -- you know -- just be quiet about it and no one bothers you.

Later she added:

> You put me on the spot when you talk about IMS because I just kind of ignore it. So I'm not supposed to ignore it. I'm supposed to know what it's all about and I do in terms of record keeping, but I don't in terms of real, deep mechanics of it.

Nevertheless, regardless of how our studies of actual behavior turn out, it is of interest to know that teachers' expressed willingness to change in our first sample was very high. Thus, the ideology of teachers in this instance was consistent with a teacher exercising little discretion.

We have been considering doing policy-capturing studies to deal with other issues raised in this paper. For example, one variation of the above study might deal with competing pressures -- pressures which call for different content. We might also be able to take into account different external factors and differences in the information the teacher is provided about these factors (for example, who are the advocates of a certain content message, what characteristics do they have which might lead to attributions of authority or power). Other policy-capturing studies might ask teachers to select textbooks or tests on the basis of systematically varied information about these materials and their advocates. One aim of such studies would be to see to what extent teachers might be swayed by the endorsement of persons portrayed as knowledgeable or powerful and to what extent they would rely solely on information presented without such endorsements.

Use of Taxonomy in Categorizing External Factors

Our taxonomy of elementary school mathematics has been used for a content analysis of tests and textbooks, which we consider possible influences on the content of instruction. The analysis of commonly used standardized tests (Stanford Achievement Test, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, and Metropolitan Achievement Test) revealed considerable differences among the tests, enough to justify our pursuing the idea that differences in tests might lead to variation in the content of

instruction (Porter et al., 1978). To be sure, we also need to find out if teachers are so unfamiliar with the content of these tests that the tests cannot have this influence. It is commonly thought that teachers do not have detailed knowledge of such tests, but in one of our pilot interviews a sixth-grade teacher spoke rather specifically from memory about the items on the Stanford Achievement Test. It remains to be seen whether this teacher is an exception or not.

The content of textbooks also varies when analyzed according to our taxonomy (Kuhs & Freeman, Note 5). Again, the implications for variation in classroom content are not yet clear. The reason is not, as with tests, that teachers are likely to be unfamiliar with the textbooks they are using, but that they are free to select from the content within textbooks in a way that they are not with tests.

Use of Taxonomy in Categorizing Teacher Conceptions

We are currently carrying out extensive open-ended interviews with elementary school teachers in order to find out how they characterize the mathematics they teach. The information from these interviews is being used to assess the adequacy of our taxonomy (and to revise it where necessary) so that we will have an instrument that can faithfully represent how teachers view elementary school mathematics. These interviews will also yield anecdotal insight into the relative importance of teacher opinion and external factors (and the interaction between them) in influencing the content covered in elementary school.

Pilot Study for Measuring Content in Classrooms

The problem of measuring content within the dynamics of a classroom raises still more difficulties. In particular, certain learning tasks

are ambiguous with regard to content -- with regard to what students might be expected to learn from these tasks. For example, in a group interview we found that, for some teachers, the study of different number bases is seen as an opportunity to develop conceptual understanding of place value while, for others, this topic is used for drill and practice in multiplication and division. Content thus depends on perspective--the teacher's perspective, the student's perspective, an observer's perspective, and others. Such ambiguity may increase the teacher's discretion since (s)he can take the same learning activities and explain their significance differently in appealing to different constituencies. For instance, a mathematical game may be justified to mathematicians in terms of developing mathematical concepts, to parents in terms of computational skills, and to students in terms of fun. We are currently planning an intensive pilot study of content in a few classrooms using observation and interviews to analyze content from teacher, observer, and possibly student perspectives. The measures developed in this study will be used as criteria for validating the less expensive and time-consuming methods of measurement required for larger scale studies.

Case Studies of Content Decision-Making

As an aid in conceptualizing the external factors which will be systematically examined in our study of natural variation, we will first do case studies of content decision making in a few selected school districts. The case studies will begin with the identification of persons in school districts who are thought to have particular influence across classrooms on the content of elementary school mathematics. The identification of these persons will be based, in the tradition of community

power studies, partly on general reputation, partly on formal position, and partly on roles played in specific decisions or debates (e.g., in the writing of district objectives, selection of textbooks and public controversies over content). In fact, we have already taken one step in this direction through use of reputational questionnaires to identify teachers for the interview study mentioned above.

Through interviews of persons identified as influential, the process of content decision-making within the district will be explored. These interviews will be supplemented by both documents and observation (e.g., of contacts between textbook salespersons and district personnel). Further data may be collected through use of our policy-capturing instruments with selected individuals and groups within the district (e.g., teachers, administrators, and parents responding as individuals; teachers responding as a committee with and without influential teachers present; administrators responding as a committee with influentials present and absent; and various combinations of teachers, administrators, and parents).

Disclaimer

Our research agenda is large and ambitious, even for an interdisciplinary team of five faculty members and several graduate students. It will be modified as our understanding increases, as obstacles arise, and as unexpected opportunities emerge. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind the overall goal: to understand the causes of variation in the content of classroom instruction and to elucidate the role of the teacher in this process.

What Is Distinct about the Politics of Education?

Peterson (1974) contends that there are no theoretical reasons for regarding the politics of education as a distinct field of study. Perhaps there are no theoretical reasons, but we can offer some pragmatic ones.

Peterson's claim is almost bound to be true in the case of studies which identify problems, apply concepts, and follow methods in the same fashion, regardless of the policy arena studied. If the analyst uses relatively undifferentiated measures of output (perhaps chosen to facilitate comparability across government sectors); if the focus is on decision-making by legislative bodies, policy boards and administrative elites; if the primary concern is with formal organizational relationships more or less common to different large-scale organizations, and if the conceptions and deliberations of persons at all levels are not taken more explicitly into account, then the politics of education literature will no doubt sound much like the politics of health, transportation, and the like. Issues of content, we have argued, offer a counterperspective for the politics of education. And while our remarks about the bottom-up approach may be applied to other fields of public policy, we as researchers are certainly not prepared to do this analysis in any other field.

This argument is no claim for a new discipline in the offing. Our methods and concepts are not original, but applications of diverse fields, for it would not be possible to do an adequate job on our project without help from various disciplines toward the following ends:

1. Defining and measuring content as a policy output.
2. Defining and measuring external influences.
3. Defining and measuring teachers' conceptions of mathematics.

In short, one way to view our research is to see it as an effort to bring together three lines of inquiry heretofore largely separate:

1. *Research on teacher decision-making* (Shavelson, 1976; Shulman & Elstein, 1975). In order to measure the content of classroom instruction, we need to know the work of school learning psychologists.

2. *Research on the educational implications of subject-matter specialties* (such as mathematics). In order to develop our taxonomy, we need to be familiar with certain aspects of mathematics education.

3. *Research on school governance and related political and sociological processes.* Here the linkage is not just a matter of knowing politics, but of knowing a good deal about education so that, in response to Wirt (1977), we can separate the educational from the political when these two aspects are tightly interwoven in practice.

It is from such a blending and contrasting of fields that a distinctive politics of education literature *might* emerge.

This paper has been written as part of a literature review to elaborate on the interconnections of the fields listed above. We welcome criticisms and suggestions which would advance this undertaking.

Figure: Taxonomy

Factor I: General Intent

1) Conceptual understanding with pictorial models
2) Conceptual understanding without pictorial models
3) Skill in reading graphs, tables, and measurement instruments
4) Computation/numeration skills
5) Applications involving graphs, tables, measurement instruments
6) Applications without graphs, tables, etc.

Factor II: Nature of Material

1) Single digits or basic no. facts
2) Single & multiple digit numbers
3) Multiple digit numbers
4) Number sentences/phrases
5) Algebraic sentences/phrases
6) Single or like fractions
7) Unlike fractions
8) Mixed numbers
9) Decimals
10) Percents
11) Measurement
12) Essential units of measurement
13) Geometry
14) Other

Factor III: Operations

1) Identify equivalents
2) Order
3) Add without carrying
4) Add with carrying
5) Column addition
6) Subtract without borrowing
7) Subtract with borrowing
8) Multiply
9) Divide without remainder
10) Divide with remainder
11) Combination
12) Apply concepts (terms)
13) Apply properties
14) Identify place value
15) Estimate

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